



Death at Miss Plimm's

By Fin Harrigan

THE MAN'S LONG pull on the handle of the old-fashioned doorbell produced a long-drawnout jingling somewhere far back in the recesses of the ancient brownstone front in the East Fifties. The man waited patiently on the stone stoop, with its white-tiled letters WELCOME. His heavy, shapeless shoes

left wet smudges on the lettering. Behind him, the quiet crosstown street gleamed from an early autumn shower.

Several minutes passed. A passerby or two glanced curiously at the hulking figure on the stoop. The man lifted a heavy head and stared searchingly at the sign above the

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by

RUTH BARTLETT NEMEC

bell-handle, which announced that within were rooms to be rented by the week, Beatrice Plimm, Prop.

He rang again.

The after-tones were still audible inside the house as the old door swung slowly open, quite obviously by the hand of the trim little lady who now stood revealed against the darkness of the entry. For a moment they stood, looking at one another.

"Miss Plimm?"

"You're the man from the agency?"

The man's heavy, dull tones prevailed in the simultaneous exchange. Both of them looked slightly surprised. Then the little woman said, a bit breathlessly, "I'm Miss Plimm. Won't you—come in?"

The man stepped over the threshold, past Miss Plimm. Inside she turned so that, as she closed the door, shutting out the comparative brightness of the street, her back was to the door.

She saw a heavy, middle-aged man, dressed in neutral-colored work clothes. His big head was set forward between powerful shoulders so that his large, pale eyes seemed to search one's face. A day's stubble of beard rimed his plain, expressionless features. From the wrinkled shirt-sleeves hung powerful, big-knuckled hands with flat, broken nails. The ends of a soiled woolen under shirt hid his wrists.

The little lady's tone was brisker, more assured as she said, "What's your name?"

"George." The word was delivered

in the same slow, flat tone, almost a drawl.

"George what?"

"George—uh—Smith."

"Married?"

"My wife's dead, mum."

"I'm sorry," said Miss Plimm.

"Any children?"

"A girl."

"And where is she?"

"Dead."

The man's tones were unemotional. He looked straight at her, seeming to expect more questions.

"How sad," Miss Beatrice Plimm bit her lip. "I suppose you have references, George?"

"No, mum." Then, as Miss Beatrice Plimm's eyebrows lifted fractionally, he raised his voice for the first time.

"But I'm a good worker, mum."

"Well!" sighed Miss Plimm. "Goodness knows, that's what I need! Well, I'll show you the room."

"You'd want me to stay on the place?" An almost eager note came into the man's voice.

"Oh, yes." Miss Plimm smiled at him. She did not look her fifty-one. Her pink and green flowered house-dress defined a still-slender waist, and her face was smooth, almost girlish. In her light brown hair that peeped from beneath an old-fashioned ribboned mob-cap were only a few streaks of silver.

"I'll show you the room," she said. "It's in the cellar. Quite comfortable."

George Smith did not move.

"This showing me the room," he

said heavily, "it means I'm hired?"

She stared at him uncertainly. "For awhile, at least. Of course . . . I don't like your not having references. But what with the man-shortage, and all . . ."

"You won't regret hiring me, Mum."

Miss Plimm seemed to feel a need for justification.

"In a girls' boarding house, we just have to have a man for the heavy work——"

"Girls live here?"

"Young actresses. All my boarders are in the profession." Miss Plimm sighed. "I was an actress, myself. Years ago."

"Actresses?" The heavy voice betrayed a spark of interest.

"Yes, poor dears. See, here——"

She opened to the left of the entry-way, revealing an old-fashioned parlor, long and narrow. She gestured at the galaxy of cabinet photographs, massed on mantels, piano, any available space.

"Those are my girls. My nephew made all the pictures. He's a photographer. Aren't they lovely?"

"Gosh, they're pretty." The man's pale-hued eyes devoured the array of smiling young faces.

"I try to do what I can to help them." She sighed. "It's hard for them, very often. I know, so well, myself . . ."

"I like pretty girls," the man offered. "My daughter was awful pretty." He continued to stare at the portraits.

Miss Plimm moved nervously. "I'll show you the room now," she said a

little sharply. Leading the way along the dim hallway to the rear of the house, she opened a door.

"This is the cellar-door. Watch your step, going down. It's dark, and the stairs are steep."

A slow cool current of musty-smelling air drifted up the dark steps. George Smith set one of his large feet on the top step. He turned around.

"Anybody home but you?" he asked tonelessly.

"Just me and Susie," said Miss Plimm brightly.

"Susie . . . ?"

"The light switch is at the bottom of the stairs."

The muffled, heavy steps and the sharp, tapping ones made a duet on the twilight stairs as Miss Plimm followed his stooping figure down into the darkness. It was very quiet. A truck on the street made the old building tremble a little, but its noise was muted.

His heavy drawl came out of the darkness below. "I can't find the light-switch . . . You'll have to show me, Mum . . ."

She heard him fumbling below her. Then a harsh, piercing shriek lanced the cellar darkness, and Miss Plimm's own scream lapped over it.

"I'll teach you, you devil!" That was the man's hoarse, angry voice.

Then the light bulb lit up the cellar.

"Stop kicking my cat!" Indignation and fright contended in Miss Plimm's voice.

The man was breathing heavily.

"I—I'm sorry, Mum. That devil

scratched me!" He glared dully at the immense, gray-black Persian crouched beside Miss Plimm's foot, its eyes blazing with fright.

"I stumbled on the cat in the dark," he added placatingly. "I—I don't like cats. I've never liked um. They bring me trouble . . ."

"Then you're not the man for this job!" Miss Plimm's lips were set thinly.

"I've got to have this job!"

"Not if you're going to treat my cat that way."

She stooped and gathered the fluffy creature into her arms. It nosed against her small chin. "Why, this whole house revolves around Lady Susie!"

"Lady what?"

"Lady Susie. My girls call her 'Lucky Lady Susie.'"

"A cat, lucky?"

"Indeed, yes." The little lady spoke primly. "She's brought luck to many a young actress in this house. My girls think she's a good luck charm, like a rabbit's foot. Lady Susie's a theatrical tradition, my man."

He was grim. "Well . . . if she's that important, we'll get along. Won't we, kitty? N-i-c-e kitty . . ." He put out a gingerly, dirt-cracked finger.

Lady Susie spat at him, emitted a heart-rending yowl, shrank deeper into Miss Plimm's embrace.

"There's the room, over there," exclaimed Miss Plimm hurriedly. "It has a stove in it. Make yourself at home—er—George. If you have any luggage to bring—"

"I got no luggage, Mum." His voice was at its dead level again.

"Very well, then. Goodness, now I must get upstairs. The girls will be coming in for tea any minute. I always serve them tea. Poor things—it cushions the end of a hard day for them. They meet with so many disappointments . . ."

There was the distant slam of a door and the sharp tap of heels from the front of the house. The cat meowed appealingly, leaped from Miss Plimm's arms and shot up the stairs like a furry streak. The landlady smiled approvingly.

"Lady Susie loves the girls," she said. "Well . . . Come upstairs when you're settled."

"He's a little odd," she confided, a few minutes later, to half a dozen of her young tenants, "but he seems to be quite strong, and we *should* have a man in the place, shouldn't we?"

"Should we?"

"Why, Jane—what do you mean?"

Jane Moreland, a tall, dark-haired girl with a wide, red mouth, shrugged.

"I mean, should we have a man who looks like that? I saw him when I came in, just now, standing at the back of the hall." She grimaced with mouth and eyebrows. "Burr! Boris Karloff can move over for him."

"Jane!" Miss Plimm was indignant. "He's a poor, lonely man, without anyone. His wife and daughter are both dead, and he needs a job. And, *we* need a man. One can't help one's appearance."

"Forget it." The girl smiled crookedly. "I'm blue tonight. My agent had bad news again, today. Come here, Lady Susie, and scratch me, for luck."

The silky Persian rubbed against her legs and purred.

"More tea, Alice?" Miss Plimm held the pot invitingly toward a gaminish red-head with wicked green eyes.

"No thanks, Miss Plimm."

"Take off those high-heeled shoes, child!" Miss Plimm tossed a cushion toward her. "Put your poor feet on that."

"I'll rub 'em for you, Al." Mary Callahan, the homely, self-styled "character woman" of the group, sank to her knees beside Alice. "Where's Diane?" she asked, kneading a slim ankle. "Anyone hear how she made out with her reading for Julian Chertok?"

"She'll be in with a contract, any minute now." It was Jane's drawl again. "Remember—Lady Susie scratched her last week?"

"Make fun of it if you like, Jane," said Miss Plimm stoutly, "but it's worked out that way. Every one of my girls Lady Susie's scratched has achieved fame in the theatre! She's a lucky cat, is Lady Susie."

"I'll take it on the legs, wearing nylons, if it'll get me even a walk-on. Come on, Susie, old gal, just a little dig—"

The door was blown open as if by a hurricane, but the hurricane was only a slender, blonde creature with huge, blue eyes who flew into the room and into Miss Plimm's startled

embrace.

"I made it! I got the part!" The high, light voice was a whole choir of rejoicing.

They crowded around her, laughing, chattering. "Diane!" "Oh, darling, I'm so glad!" "Let me touch you!"

"You'll be famous, darling," said Jane, warmly. "Close the door, Alice, it's chilly in here."

The blonde girl was crying a little. "It's all because of you," she said to Miss Plimm, "you guardian angel of struggling young actresses."

"Who feeds us three meals a day," supplemented Jane.

"And forgets to submit a bill," Alice chimed in.

"And has the most wonderful cat in the world." Diane bent and stroked the Persian's fur. Lady Susie meowed ecstatically and made biscuits on the carpet with her front paws. "Susie, you know, don't you, that you're making a famous actress out of me?"

"What I think," said Alice, "is that we're all so sold on this superstition about Susie's scratches that it gives us the confidence we need to sell ourselves."

"Superstition, indeed!" Diane cuddled the cat. "One tiny dig from your magic claws, and success is inevitable. Ouch! Susie, you witch, once is enough!"

The cat emitted a mournful yowl, leaped from her arms and retreated to Miss Plimm's chair, staring at the door, her fur bristling.

"Whatever on earth—" began the old actress. Suddenly she stood up,

stepped swiftly to the door, and opened it.

The new handyman stood in the entrance. He blinked a little at the light from the parlor, but his face showed no emotion.

"George!" Miss Plimm was annoyed. "What are you doing here?"

"Nothin, Mum." He looked slowly about the room, at the circle of girls' faces, wide-eyed now, staring at him. "I—I come up to see if you wanted more wood on the fire. It's cold."

"Why didn't you knock?"

"I . . . was going to, when I heard one of the young ladies talking, saying she got a part. I'm glad."

Diane stood up, smiling. "Thank you, George. That's awfully sweet of you."

"You'll be a great actress, miss."

From Miss Plimm's chair, Lady Susie yowled suddenly and spat. Something stirred in the man's dead eyes as he looked at the Persian.

"I'll get some wood, if you—" he began.

"We'll call if we want you, George," said Miss Plimm definitely.

"Yes, Mum." He closed the door. "Biddable fellow." Jane's drawl broke the silence.

"I don't like it," said Miss Plimm fretfully. "The idea, his listening at the door."

Diane laughed gently. "Oh, stop it!" she said. "He's just an awkward odd old man. I thought it was rather sweet of him to wish me well. If he eavesdrops, it's probably because he's lonely."

"You trust everybody, Diane," said Miss Plimm.

"Well, it does seem safer with a man in the house." Marcia, a tall, quiet girl in an orange house-robe hazarded the opinion.

"Susie doesn't trust him," said Miss Plimm thoughtfully. "Just notice how her claws go out the minute he appears, and that yowl of hers whenever he's near."

She told them about the occurrence in the cellar.

"Wonderful cat," said Jane. "Not only does she predict our success, she's a watch-dog."

"Just be careful, girls," said Miss Plimm to them all. She looked around at each one and lowered her voice. "I don't doubt that our man George is perfectly all right. I shouldn't have hired him, otherwise. But it wouldn't be wise to make him too much one of the family, I think . . ."

"BARTERED Honor," starring the unknown young actress Diane Carvel, was a smash hit seven days after its late-November opening. The old brownstone front in the Fifties took on a rather frenetic tone. It looked out of newspaper and magazine theater sections; it was mentioned on nationwide radio hookups; in Hollywood, a major studio assigned writers to a new story about a theatrical boarding house in New York.

For Diane Carvel stayed on at Miss Plimm's, and the fan-writers and interviewers saw her there. Her press agent knew a good story; the

magic virtue of a tap from one of Lady Susie's soft little paws was bruited far and wide. Miss Plimm turned away aspiring, out-of-town girls by the score.

"Poor dears," she said one evening, "I hate to turn them away. I do believe there is something about this place, Diane."

She had stayed up to give her star boarder—or boarder star—a cup of hot tea after the night's performance of "Bartered Honor." The slight, blonde actress was curled at her landlady's feet, her eyes closed, her head against Miss Plimm's knee.

"What's the matter, dear?" the older woman asked. "You seem so tired. Nothing is worrying you, is it?"

"Plimmy—you were a famous actress once, weren't you?"

"Yes, dear." The elderly voice was gentle.

"How long did it last—your—well, your 'fame'?"

The little landlady waited an instant before answering. "Oh . . . until a new 'Toast of Broadway' came along. Then I faded into obscurity again."

"It hurt, terribly—didn't it?"

"It's so cruel." Miss Plimm's voice was quiet. "One never gets used to it, I suppose. You've been worrying about it, haven't you?"

"I—oh, I wish it could last forever!" The girl spoke impulsively. "Plimmy, I couldn't bear it—to go on living, with nothing but my dreams of the past."

Miss Plimm laid a hand on the fair hair. "Don't worry about it, dear.

Perhaps you'll be the exception."

There was a plaintive "meow" and Diane felt a soft, furry body slide along her hand. She opened her eyes and smiled. "Hello, Susie. You, too."

Miss Plimm stood up. "I'm going into the kitchen and make some fresh tea. Come, cat . . . I have some milk for you." She moved toward the door, Lady Susie ran ahead of her, looking back, tail in the air.

"I'm going to bed, Plimmy." The girl got to her feet. "Thanks for everything. Good night."

From the kitchen came no answer. Diane smiled, and went out in the dark hallway. Her room was at the far end, on the ground floor at the back of the house, near the top of the cellar stairs. She walked along the hall, her mules flopping, humming a tune from the show.

*"I don't want to go
If you won't be there . . ."*

There was a plaintive, warning "meow" from the darkness at her feet. Diane stared down. Two yellow eyes shone back at her.

"Why, Susie . . ." she began.

"Miss Diane . . ." The voice was slow, heavy.

"George!" The girl whistled, startled. "What are you doing here . . . ?"

"Why . . . uh . . ." The dull, toneless voice was at the head of the cellar stairs. "I didn't mean to scare you," it finished.

"It's so dark out here in the hall. I didn't see you."

"You like that cat, Miss Diane." There was an overtone of hatred in the level voice.

"Why—why, Susie's a good luck cat . . ."

"Cats bring evil." The slow speech was passionless.

She felt the need to say something banal. "You're up late, George."

"I stay up lots of nights till you come in, Miss Diane."

"You do . . . ?"

It was odd, she thought, the grotesque dialogue in the darkness between two disembodied voices . . .

"You're so pretty, Miss Diane. Your hair, and your face. You walk nice, too."

The cat yowled piercingly, her cry dying away in a long-drawn-out moan.

"Susie, hush!"

"She always yowls that way. She don't like me, Miss Diane. She's just like the cat my daughter had."

"Your daughter . . . ?"

"You make me think of my daughter, Miss Diane. She was pretty, too. Awful pretty. She was . . . killed."

"Oh, I'm sorry! Well, good night, George. I must be getting—"

"I heard what you was saying to Miss Plimm, Miss Diane."

She drew a sharp breath.

"You were listening—George?"

"You worrying about—your fame lasting. Miss Diane, you'll be famous as long as you live. I know you will."

"Good night, George."

"Good night, Miss Diane."

Heavy footfalls went down the cellar stairs. It was silent in the black hallway. The girl took two steps to the door of her room, reached it. There was the sound of a light-switch clicking. No light followed it. The switch clicked several times.

"Miss Plimm! Miss Plimm!"

"Yes?" The little landlady's voice came from the front of the house.

"My bulb's burned out. It's awfully dark back here. What'll I do . . . ?"

"That's a shame, Diane." The cheery voice was like light, itself. "I'll get George to put in another bulb. George! George!"

"Coming, Mum."

Diane strangled a little scream. His voice had been almost beside her. Had he been there all the time?

The plodding footsteps receded toward the front of the house. A plaintive "meow" came from the floor of Diane's little room. She bent and put her hand out exploringly until her fingers met soft fur. She took the cat in her arms. Lady Susie snuggled into them and began to purr.

"There, there." The girl stroked her. "Why doesn't he come with the light? He acted so queerly," she added, aloud. "Susie . . . what's the trouble . . . ?" The big cat was twisting violently in her arms. "Susie . . . !"

The shuffling footsteps came down the hall. The girl felt the cat trembling. "George? Susie—"

She screamed.

Miss Plimm ran out of her parlor.

"Diane? Is anything . . ."

She heard the girl's voice, high, frantic, cry out something.

There was the sound of a fall.

Miss Plimm rushed down the dark hall, toward Diane's room.

"TELL THE stenographer what you saw and heard, Miss Plimm." The young lieutenant of detectives was polite. "I know all this is very difficult for you. Just your brief statement, if you please."

"There, honey." Jane patted her hand. The household was together in the parlor, with the single exception of George.

"After you came with a candle—what then?"

Miss Plimm twisted her small hands. "I saw Diane—" her voice broke and she sobbed once—"I saw her, lying against her armchair."

"Was she alone?" Lieutenant Dawson prodded gently.

The little lady shuddered. "No. George was with her. Standing over her, with that awful, vacant look on his face!"

"Did he say anything?"

"He said: 'She's fainted. Pretty Miss Diane, she's fainted.'"

"What did you say?"

"I—I think I shouted 'she's dead!' Somehow I knew she was!" The sobs began again. "She looked so lovely—so exquisite, lying there—lovelier than in life." Miss Plimm wept.

"Your man's—Smith's—story is that he came in to her room to fix the light bulb."

"That's right. I sent him in my-

self."

"Have you any evidence that Miss Carvel was alive before your handyman went to her room?"

"Indeed I have!" Miss Plimm looked at him out of tear-clouded eyes. "She called to me to tell me the light was burned out in her room. Then, after George came in to get a bulb, and went back to her room, I heard the scream—her scream!" She shuddered. "Oh-h-h!"

"Try and remember," said Dawson tensely. "Did she say anything?"

Miss Plimm thought. "Yes," she said at last, "and I can't be sure these are the exact words, but what she said, in essence, was 'George, I know you're in this room—let go of me!'"

Dawson swore. After a silence, during which he broke two matches trying to light one cigarette, he apologized.

"Ladies," he said, "this is fantastic. A girl is dead. There are no unusual marks on her body, no signs of violence . . ."

"You mean George didn't . . . ?" It was Jane.

"The handyman? Yes, I know he was in the room with her. He's rather an—odd character. But—well, he tells a straightforward story. The girl was in her room as he entered, bringing a new bulb, he says. As he was trying to find the light-cord in the darkness, she screamed. Then he heard her fall, and there were sounds like a struggle. He says she rolled against one of his legs. Then you came in, Miss Plimm."

He shook his head. "It doesn't add

up."

"I don't believe George did it." Alice, her voice thinly childish from strain, spoke into the silence.

Dawson sighed. "Well, we're holding him for the time being. I want to check on that story about his wife and daughter. But—"

He hesitated. "I might as well tell you. We found a suicide note."

"Suicide . . ." the word came out in a concerted gasp from several girls at once. Dawson nodded.

"Typewritten. On last year's theater program. With her fingerprints on it. Something about how she was worried that her success wouldn't last, and about achieving fame through death."

Miss Plimm sobbed heartbrokenly. "Oh, the poor darling!"

Dawson spoke to the room. Well that's all—for all of you except Miss Plimm."

When the girls had gone, he closed the door. "Right now, it looks like suicide. I—well, I'm going to ask you to keep George on here, Miss Plimm. I'm not satisfied. The girl's screams don't jibe with a suicide verdict."

"You want me to keep George . . . ?"

"Yes. I want you to let him go on working here, as though nothing had happened. Let him know you think he's innocent. Give him plenty of rope."

"But Lieutenant—the safety of my girls—"

Dawson nodded. "Possibly it's dangerous. On the other hand, George Smith may be innocent."

WELL, kids—this is it!

Jane Moreland tried to drawl the words, but her inner triumph shone like a bright flame.

"Janie!" Marcia ran to her and threw her arms around her. "You got it, darling!"

The tall girl spread her hands. "I might as well admit it—I got it!" She gestured swiftly, impulsively. "Oh, God—I've waited so long for it, kids, it's—"

She fell on her knees besides Miss Plimm's chair, and kissed the little elderly lady.

"I'm so happy, child," Miss Plimm held her in her arms a moment.

Jane stood up. "Success is supposed to disillusion you," she drawled, "but it looks as though I've acquired a new illusion." She laughed. "I've got to believe in that tradition about Lady Susie, now."

"Jane!" It was Mary Callahan. "Did Lady Susie—"

"That she did! Two weeks ago—just after—Diane—I was playing with her in here one morning, and she gave me just the smallest, playful tap with her claws!"

"But you didn't say anything—"

"I didn't want to. I've been trying so long. But it worked!"

Miss Plimm laughed softly. "Of course, dear, the kitty has nothing to do with it. We all know that, seriously. But you believed she'd charmed you, and you probably read better than you've ever read before."

She reached out to stroke the cat where it lay purring in her lap, but the fluffy Persian jumped to the floor,

with a raucous "meow" and retreated to the other side of the room.

The door opened.

"Evenin', girls." George Smith towered in the doorway, a stiff smile working on his stubbled features.

"Yes, George?" It was Miss Plimm who spoke.

"I was passing in the hall, an' I heard what Miss Jane was saying. I'm glad for you, Miss Jane."

"Thank you, George. I'm so glad, I could dance!"

"Now you'll be a famous actress, too . . . like Miss Diane."

"George!" said Miss Plimm sharply.

"Excuse me, Mum." He closed the door, and his heavy steps went along the hall toward the rear of the house.

"He's a strange man," said Miss Plimm. "Well, girls—dinner at seven. And something special—for our new star!"

"Star—perhaps," said Jane Moreland, soberly. "But I'm staying on right here in your house, Miss Plimm. It's brought me luck."

JANE MORELAND'S death was a nationwide sensation. Black headlines bannered the tragic, inexplicable passing of the second young actress within a three months, at the now-famous boarding-house, under almost identical conditions.

Irony was added when it became known that Jane Moreland had been offered a motion picture contract, to start when "Twentieth Century Magic" closed . . .

The really sensational angle of the

case, however, was the disappearance of George Smith. The slow-footed handyman vanished into the night, after the girl's body was found in her little third-floor room, and before the police could arrive. The dragnet for him spread over five Eastern states.

It was on the sixth day of the hunt that the telephone rang in Miss Plimm's kitchen.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," mumbled the little landlady as she trotted toward the ringing instrument. "Hello," she said, tilting her chin to reach the mouthpiece on the wall.

"This is Lieutenant Dawson, Miss Plimm."

"Oh, yes, Lieutenant . . . what . . . I mean, is there . . . ?"

"Are you alone?"

"Why . . . yes, the girls are all gone."

"Lock yourself in your room," said the policeman's voice, roughly, "and stay there until I can reach you. A man who looks like George Smith was reported seen in your neighborhood a few minutes ago."

"Oh, Lieutenant . . ." The little lady was tremulous. "What will I . . ."

"Just lock yourself in. Immediately. This man is dangerous, Miss Plimm. That's all, now. Be careful. We're coming over there."

"Oh, dear . . ." She uttered the lament in a thin little voice as she replaced the receiver. She looked around the kitchen, listened.

The house was quiet.

She started for her room, which opened off the kitchen. Her hand

was on the knob of the yellow-painted door when the screams reached her, a cat's harsh, whiplash cries of fear and anger.

"Lady Susie!" The cat's agonized wails were coming from under the kitchen floor. Miss Plimm ran for the cellar stairs, forgetful of police warnings.

She clattered wildly down the steps to the basement floor.

"Oh!" she gasped. "George!" she screamed. "George! Drop that cat this instant!"

A man's hulking figure was silhouetted against the red light streaming out of the open furnace-door. In his big hands he held Lady Susie, and he was making every effort to cram her into the open furnace.

"George!"

The big man seemed to come out of a trance. He straightened up and let the cat drop to the floor. The terrified animal dashed for the stairs and the upper world of daylight.

"George, I'm ashamed of you," said Miss Plimm, speaking as to an eight-year-old. "What on earth were you trying to do to my poor little pet?"

"She's an evil thing!" He spoke heavily but with passionate conviction. "I've hated that cat since I set foot in this house, Miss Plimm. I had to come back and fix her. She's made 'em all mistrust me, Mum!"

"A grown man, trying to push a poor, helpless little kitty into a burning furnace!"

"That cat's brought nothing but trouble."

"George . . ." Miss Plimm's voice

had altered, subtly. No longer was it angry. "George . . . you don't look well."

"She'd be better off dead. She's an evil thing——"

"George, why don't you come up stairs?" The landlady's voice was sweet now, and entreating. "I'll make you a cup of tea."

"Tea!" he said, gruffly.

"Come along, George. We'll talk it all over—in the parlor."

"You know the police are after me?"

"Of course, George." Her voice was wheedling. "But they'll never think of looking for you in my parlor."

"They—they blame me for Miss Jane dying. And—and Miss Diane." All at once, his voice was utterly tired.

"All right—let's get the tea over with."

In the parlor, she seated him in an easy chair.

"Now, you be comfortable, George. I'll see to the water." She gave him a sad smile, and hurried out to the kitchen.

In a moment she was back again. "You know, George, it's hard to forgive you for doing such a cruel thing to my cat."

"I hate cats. They're evil."

Miss Plimm looked at him wisely, a motherly smile on her face. "I understand you're a dangerous criminal, George. Cream or lemon in your tea?"

"It was my daughter's pet cat turned over the kerosene lamp and set our house afire . . ." He shud-

dered, suddenly, and buried his head in his hands. Miss Plimm continued to smile tenderly at him. "I got the blame," he quavered. "She looked—like Miss Diane."

"Of course, George." She handed him a cup of steaming tea. "There you are. Nice and hot. Drink it, every bit. Just the same, George, you shouldn't have mistreated Lady Susie. I can't allow that, can I? How's your tea, George?"

"Bitter, Mum." His voice grew desperate. "Don't turn me in, Mum. I—I—something made me want to kill that cat. She got me into all this . . ."

"Drink your tea, George." Miss Plimm was downright motherly. A sound of squealing brakes came from the street. There were pounding footsteps, and a thunderous tattoo of knocking at the front door.

The man raised his heavy head and looked at Miss Plimm.

"Is that the police?"

"I shouldn't wonder, George," said the little lady brightly. "I'll have to let them in, won't I?"

"I . . . I guess . . . so." His voice was thick—thicker than its wont, even, and slower. "I . . . I've got to . . . get out . . . I . . . feel . . . fun . . . funny . . . my head . . ."

The teacup and saucer fell from his hand, clattering together on the carpet. His head fell far forward; overbalanced, his body slid out of the chair, and he came to rest in an attitude of abasement, knees on the carpet, forehead touching the floor, beside the spilled tea.

"Open up!" shouted an authorita-

tive voice. "Police!"

Miss Plimm stared at the man's body on the carpet.

"My goodness," she observed, "George is dead." She straightened her lace cap on her head. "I'm coming," she called aloud. "My goodness, don't break the door down!"

For the next few minutes, events swirled confusedly about Miss Plimm. Then, Lieutenant Dawson closed the parlor door and sat down facing the little landlady. He was sniffing at the teacup which had lain on the floor.

"So you killed him, eh, Miss Plimm?"

"Why, yes." The little lady smiled. "You said he was a dangerous criminal, so I—"

"How, Miss Plimm?"

She was modest. "Why, just a little cyanide of potassium in his tea. Not much, really, only a lit—"

"Cyanide . . .?"

"Yes." Miss Plimm sighed, as at some affecting thought. "I got all I wanted from my nephew's photo laboratory. That's what I used on the girls, too. You know, Diane and Jane."

Dawson sat bolt upright. "You murdered them . . .?" He slipped one hand into his side-pocket and kept it there.

"Oh, no, Lieutenant!" The little lady was hurt. "Not murdered! I gave them lasting fame!"

"You what?"

She was very earnest. "Their names will remain forever in the history of the American theater, because they died at the peak of their

success! It's what both of them wanted."

Dawson stood up and walked slowly to the door.

"According to the suicide notes, eh?"

"Oh!" Miss Plimm simpered. She reached down to where Lady Susie lay on the floor at her feet, and pulled her pet onto her lap. "I wrote those, of course. But I *knew* how both girls felt. You see, all these long, long years, I've suffered the tortures of being a has-been—just an old actress who's been forgotten. I couldn't bear to see those lovely young things suffer those pangs, those heart-aches!"

"Just how," said Dawson meticulously, "did it happen that both those notes had the *girls'* prints on them, and none of yours?"

"Oh, that was easy! I'd hand the girls those old programs to look at while I was wearing gloves. Then I'd drop by a typewriter store, and pretend I was trying out a machine, and write the note!"

Dawson stood with his back to the door, now.

"Very clever, Miss Plimm. And the poison . . . ?"

She shrugged. "Oh, that. Why,

when the time came, I'd put the cyanide on Lady Susie's claws, mixed with library paste. I'd already arranged for the burned-out bulbs. I'd steal out, very quietly, in the darkness and put Lady Susie in the girl's rooms. They never even suspected I was anywhere near, I know!" She giggled. "The girls loved her so—Lady Susie, I mean. And she loved them to stroke her, too!"

"And then," said Dawson sternly, "George would be sent up to the room to fix the bulb."

"Exactly!" cried the little lady. "Lady Susie hated him. When he came into the room, he'd frighten her, and she'd scratch the girls. The poison took effect almost instantly. Well——" she spread her hands "—cat scratches were a tradition in my house, everyone knew about them."

"Miss Plimm——" began Dawson.

"I'd have told you the whole thing before," she went on, "but you only asked about George."

"Miss Plimm—one moment——"

She shook her head sadly. "I should never have trusted George. Wasn't it dreadful what the awful man tried to do to my cat?"

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Here is a sample of the weekly news-letter by Leslie Charteris.
Only the creator of THE SAINT would have written it.

A Letter from
The Saint



Dear Reader:

I once mentioned in print, with characteristic modesty, that May 12 seemed to me to be a very propitious birthday for brains because that date witnessed the introduction to this reeling world of two of the most brilliant people I know, namely Philip Wylie and Leslie Charteris.

Since that pronouncement I have probed further into this auspicious anniversary and uncovered the fact that it also marks the dribbling debut of Florence Nightingale and Edward Lear.

My knowledge of astrology is not adequate to enable me to trace the mystic link between these personalities. I have sometimes been told that my Immortal Works have brought cheer and comfort to the bedridden; but it must also be admitted that certain other readers (doubtless of a different intellectual caliber) have said that I made them sick. It is of course true that Mr Edward Lear was a distinguished landscape artist, which I could probably have been myself if I had ever taken it up; but he is best remembered today as a writer of nonsense rhymes and a pioneer of the once-famous double-talk made classic by Lewis Carroll and his alithy toves. Among his famous works you students of the finer poetry will doubtless remember

There was an old man with a beard
Who said: "It is just as I feared,
The owl and a hen,
Have all built their nests in my beard."

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